

## BIRD WATCHING AROUND LAE

GEOFF P. SMITH

This issue of *MURUK* includes bird lists and comments from a wide range of localities within PNG. Manuscripts have been received in the north, Tari in the east, Woodlark Island in the east and many places in between. Hopefully, these articles may inspire others to record their observations from other areas of PNG.

Of particular interest is Geoff Smith's "Bird Watching around Lae". Where-to-Watch-Birds articles are always welcome and are useful not only to resident bird watchers but to visitors, who would like to know the number of species seen in the time available to them. We have received a number of such reports, but more would be appreciated. We currently lack coverage of the Coast and the Highlands (except for Tari).

Very few people have reported their records for inclusion in "Recent Observations" during 1990. This means that the following months will fade away without input from both residents and visitors. Of particular interest are observations of nesting birds (the breeding seasons for many PNG species are poorly known and, for a large proportion, nesting habits are not described), observations of birds of prey, particularly diurnal raptors, and observations of birds of prey, particularly diurnal raptors, when compared with Beehler *et al.* (1986) or Coates (1983 & 1989), observations of migrants etc. Please, please submit your observations to the editor.

**EDITORS:** Roger Hicks with technical assistance from Mike Hopkins and editorial help from Edie Brown, Peter Ferguson Hopkins, Jenny Hicks. The cover on this *MURUK* and on the last issue, Vol. 4.2, were drawn by Jones Hiaso, for which many thanks. Jones will also be assisting on future covers.

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Roger Hicks (Editor)

Lae is situated in Morobe Province in North-East New Guinea, on the Huon Gulf, close to the mouth of the Markham River. It is an area of very high rainfall, the wettest season being from May to September. During this time there is the distinct possibility that morning trips will be a complete wash-out. Morobe Province contains a wide variety of habitats, from coastal rain forest to alpine grassland, and the road network in the province is fairly good. Almost totally absent, however, are extensive areas of marshland and their associated wetland species. The bird names used in this paper follow Beehler *et al.* (1986).

The airport is at Nadzab, in the Markham Valley, some 45 km from Lae city. There are a number of reasonable hotels in Lae, but all are pretty expensive for the facilities offered. Lae International and the Melanesian are probably the most comfortable. The Huon Gulf and Klinkii Lodge are slightly more reasonably priced. Budget travellers usually head for Buablung House on Cassowary road, although the facilities are a bit spartan. Other reasonable accommodation can be found at the Lutheran Guest House and Salvation Army self-catering units, and, from time to time, the Lae School of Catering.

Around the city of Lae, a number of species can be seen in the urban gardens and larger open spaces such as the botanical gardens and the campus of the University of Technology. Common species include Black Kite, Peaceful Dove, Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove, Red-cheeked Parrot, Dusky Lory, Rainbow Lorikeet, Sacred Kingfisher, Pacific Swallow, White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike, Willie Wagtail, Yellow-bellied Sunbird, Helmeted Friarbird, Varied Honeyeater, Singing Starling, Hooded Butcherbird and Torresian Crow.

Somewhat more difficult to observe, but usually present during at least part of the year, are Little Pied Cormorant, Little Black Cormorant, Whistling Kite, Brahminy Kite, Collared Sparrowhawk, Purple Swamphen, Lesser Golden Plover, Whimbrel, White-throated Needle-tail, Eclectus Parrot, Brush Cuckoo, Pheasant Coucal, Forest Kingfisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, Dollarbird, Grey Shrike-Thrush, Papuan Flowerpecker, Black Sunbird, Scrub White-eared Meliphaga, Yellow-faced Myna, Brown Oriole, Spangled Drongo and Fawn-breasted Bowerbird.

A number of more uncommon species include the following that I have recorded from the Unitech campus: Darter, Intermediate Egret, Black-winged Kite, Gurney's Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Brown Quail, Bush-Hen, Long-toed Stint, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Great Cuckoo-Dove, Stephan's Ground-Dove, Papuan Mountain Pigeon,

**Western Black-capped Lory, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Oriental Cuckoo, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, Malay Bronze-Cuckoo, Channel-billed Cuckoo, Barn Owl, Papuan Frogmouth, Large-tailed Nightjar, Hook-billed Kingfisher, Cicadabird, White-shouldered Fairy-Wren, Leaden Flycatcher, Shining Flycatcher and Streak-headed Honeyeater.**

The sea, of course, has its own species which do not venture far on to land at all. A number of terns can be seen near the end of the air strip in Lae, or more especially past the main wharf and towards the mouth of the Markham. Species observed include the **White-winged Black Tern, Sooty Tern, Crested Tern, Lesser Crested Tern and Brown Noddy**. The **Common Black-headed Gull** has also been seen a number of times (Finch 1986). **Lesser Frigate Birds** are quite common, but the spectacular sight of a **White-bellied Sea-Eagle** skimming for fish is only rarely seen.

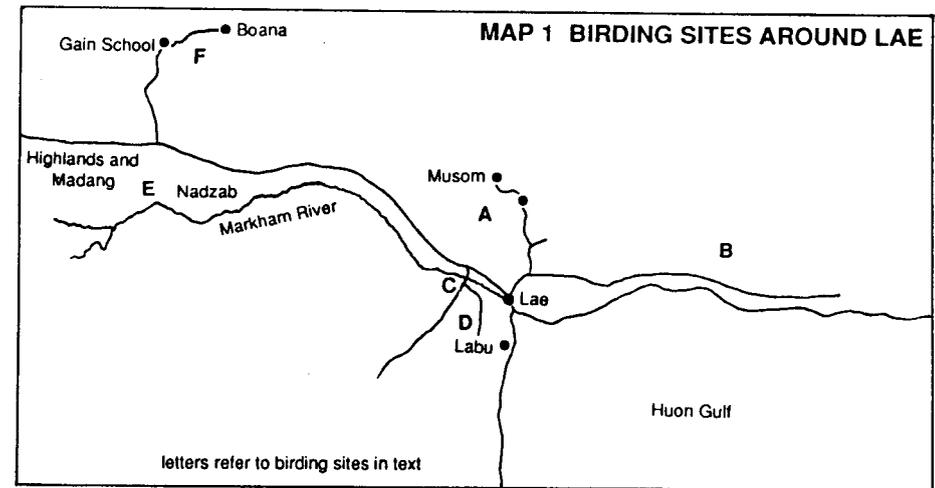
A number of waders make a brief appearance near the mouth of the Markham River during migration. Species observed include **Little Ringed Plover, Grey-tailed Tattler and Common Sandpiper**. The **Lesser Golden Plover** ventures further from the coast, and may occasionally be seen on the airstrip or sports ovals. Some non-sea birds may also make occasional appearances near the coast, such as the **Papuan Mountain Pigeon** and **Pied Imperial Pigeon** flying high overhead. The species mentioned here may also be seen along the coast towards Bukaua to the East and Salamaua to the South-West. At Salamaua, the **Orange-fronted Fruit-Dove** appears to be common.

#### DAY EXCURSIONS FROM LAE

A number of roads lead out of Lae (see Map 1) and give ready access to places where many interesting bird species may be found. Unfortunately, the Huon endemics all live at altitudes beyond the road system, apart from the **Emperor Bird of Paradise**, which can be reached on the Boana road. It is very difficult to get to most of the places described by public transport, so access to a vehicle is essential. On most of the unsealed roads, the condition of the surface can vary considerably, especially after heavy rain, and a 4-wheel drive vehicle is recommended if possible. At the time of writing, there is considerable "rascal" (criminal) activity around Lae, and caution is advised. The following routes are within about an hour's drive of Lae. Early morning is by far the best time to see birds here, but even so, forest species are notoriously difficult to see. The calls are the best guide to a bird's presence.

##### A. Sankwep-Gawam-Musom road

This road gives ready access to forested areas and is within easy reach of Lae. Travelling from Lae past Unitech and Bumayong High School, the road crosses the Busu river before bearing off to the left and down to the Sankwep River. Here **Torrent**



**Flycatcher** can often be seen on rocks in the river, or perched on overhanging branches. Over the Sankwep, the road goes up a steep hill, and here a variety of lowland forest birds can be seen.

Some of the species commonly observed in this area include: **Crested Hawk, Long-tailed Buzzard, Brahminy Kite, Collared Sparrowhawk, Grey Goshawk, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove, Ornate Fruit-Dove, Zoe Imperial Pigeon, Western Black-capped Lory, Red-cheeked Parrot, Eclectus Parrot, Common Koel, Greater Black Coucal, Moustached Tree-Swift, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Dollarbird, Boyer's Cuckoo-Shrike, White-bellied Thicket-Fantail, Filled Monarch, Streak-headed Honeyeater, Metallic Starling, Brown Oriole, Spangled Drongo, White-eared Catbird, King Bird of Paradise, Raggiana Bird of Paradise, and Grey Crow.**

Not all of these species are equally easy to see, however. For example, the spectacular scarlet and white **King Bird of Paradise** is reasonably common, but it is extremely difficult to get a good view of one. As with many other species, this bird may be heard calling much more frequently than it is observed. The **Raggiana Bird of Paradise** is quite common from the Sankwep onwards, although fully plumed males are not often seen.

Leaving the Sankwep River, the road proceeds to the settlement of Gwabadik and on through some fairly untouched forest (all of this area has been logged at some time). Here, in addition to those species listed, some of the less easily observed species may be found, such as **Grey-headed Goshawk, Little Eagle, New Guinea Bronzewing,**

**Great Cuckoo-Dove, Wompoo Fruit-Dove, Emerald Ground-Dove, Pinon Imperial Pigeon, Papuan Mountain Pigeon, Red-flanked Lorikeet, Palm Cockatoo, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Buff-faced Pygmy-Parrot, Double-eyed Fig-Parrot, Vulturine Parrot, White-crowned Koel, Dwarf Koel, Blyth's Hornbill, Blue-breasted Pitta, Varied Triller, Green-backed Gerygone, Northern Fantail, Golden Monarch, Black-sided Robin, Long-billed Honeyeater, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Streak-headed Mannikin and Lowland Peltops.**

As the road goes on further, it gets higher and higher until it reaches an altitude of about 600 m at the village of Gawam. From here, the road continues across a valley to the village of Musom at about the same altitude. Gawam is also the beginning of a number of routes in to mountain villages due north. From Musom, a road has been pushed towards the village of Lambaip, the eventual aim being to reach Boana. However, at the time of writing, this road is in very poor condition, and not useful as anything but a walking track.

As the altitude increases from Gwabadik, a number of species are found which do not usually occur at lower altitudes. These include: **Brown-collared Brush-Turkey, Black-billed Cuckoo-Dove, Pheasant Pigeon, Little Red Lorikeet, Black-shouldered Cuckoo-Shrike, Rusty Mouse-Warbler, Hooded Pitohui, Black Butcherbird, Crinkle-collared Manucode, Magnificent Riflebird and Magnificent Bird of Paradise.** The **Raggiana Bird of Paradise** is quite common along the road, but at an area near a new bridge just before the steep ascent to Gawam village, plumed males can usually be seen displaying. The **Torrent-Lark** may be found near streams at higher altitudes beyond Musom village, and the **Emperor Bird of Paradise** is also within range here.

#### **B. Bukaua road**

This road runs east of Lae parallel with the coast for 20 or 30 km. It ends at the village of Bukaua. The condition of the road varies considerably, and some of the rivers may be too high to cross if there has been heavy rain. The road runs through grassland and cleared farms and gardens past Situm settlement, and further into forest. Many of the lowland forest species found round Sankwep River and described in the previous section can be found here. There are no roads to higher altitudes, but there are walking tracks to villages in the hills at a number of places. The road is unsealed, and a 4-wheel drive vehicle is usually required.

Extensive lowland rainforest past the Buso River is usually good for **Blyth's Hornbill**, and a number of larger pigeons such the **Zoe** and **Pinon Imperial Pigeons** and the **Great Cuckoo-Dove**. In areas of grassland, small flocks of **Grand Mannikin** and **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin** are found, and occasionally a **Black-winged Kite** can be seen hovering for prey.

#### **C. Markham Bridge area**

This is another good area close to Lae for visitors with not much time. Travelling from Lae, the road to Bulolo and Wau bears off to the left from the Highlands Highway after about 15 km. Another 3 or 4 km brings one to the Markham Bridge. Just over the bridge the road runs through a stretch of several km of forest, which is usually quite productive of the more common lowland forest species. In the low-lying sago swamps, the **Glossy-mantled Manucode** can often be seen, or heard giving its long drawn out plaintive whistling call. Also common are the **Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove, Dusky Lory, Western Black-capped Lory, Eclectus Parrot, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Boyer's Cuckoo-Shrike, White-bellied Thicket-Fantail, Streak-headed Honeyeater, Yellow-faced Myna, Spangled Drongo and Hooded Butcherbird**, while other species occasionally seen include the **Crested Hawk, Long-tailed Buzzard, Whistling Kite, Brahminy Kite, Pacific Black Duck, Purple Swamphen, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Zoe Imperial Pigeon, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Barking Owl, Moustached Tree-Swift, Hook-billed Kingfisher, Forest Kingfisher, Varied Triller, Large-billed Gerygone, Black Sunbird, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Lowland Peltops, King Bird of Paradise, Raggiana Bird of Paradise and Grey Crow.**

#### **D. Markham-Labu road**

Just over the Markham Bridge, a rough road runs to the left, parallel to the right bank of the Markham for a kilometre or so before turning right into a logging area. The road sidles along the edge of the steeply rising slopes for about 15 km before ending in newly bulldozed logging tracks. To the left, low-lying bush and sago swamps stretch out to the Labu Lakes and the coast. This is strictly speaking a private road, owned by Labu Butu villagers and logged by PI Logging Ltd., and a boom gate at the entrance may occasionally be locked, although the gate-keeper can usually be found close by. Since the area has only recently been logged, the bird life is good, and generally quite visible.

Those species mentioned in the previous section on the Markham Bridge area are all found along this road. Some species are more common, for example the **Crested Hawk, Brahminy Kite, Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Dwarf Koel, Moustached Tree-Swift, Blyth's Hornbill, Black Cuckoo-Shrike, Golden Monarch, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Streak-headed Mannikin, Metallic Starling, Lowland Peltops and Grey Crow.**

In addition, you may be lucky enough to come across such species as **Grey-headed Goshawk, Little Eagle, Common Scrubfowl, Wompoo Fruit-Dove, Palm Cockatoo, Vulturine Parrot, Yellow-billed Kingfisher, King Bird of Paradise and Raggiana Bird of Paradise.** In particular, **Palm Cockatoos** and **Blyth's Hornbills** seem to be reasonably common. In 1988, I came across a huge congregation of hornbills just before sunset. They gathered on some bare trees high on the ridge before flying off in small parties towards the coast. I counted over 75 of them - a most spectacular sight.

### E. Nadzab Airport and the Markham Valley

Nadzab airport, some 40 km outside Lae on the Highlands Highway, is situated in savanna grassland typical of much of the Markham Valley. You can see some species here which are more difficult to find elsewhere, such as **Pheasant Coucal**, **Forest Kingfisher**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**, **Singing Bushlark**, **Pacific Swallow**, **Tawny Grassbird**, **Rufous-banded Honeyeater**, **White-breasted Wood-Swallow** and **Fawn-breasted Bowerbird**. In addition, some small waders occasionally alight on the extensive grassy strips on their migrations. Such species include the **Lesser Golden Plover** and **Whimbrel**.

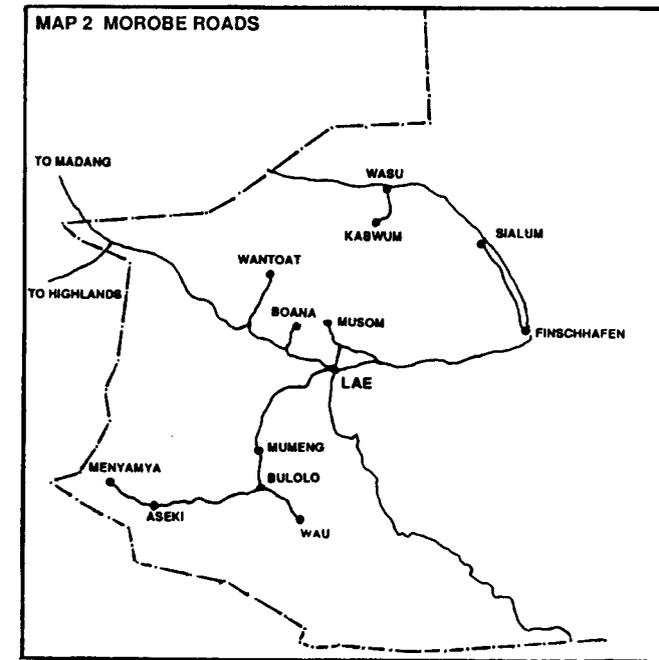
Other notable species to be found in the Markham include **Black-winged Kite**, **Spotted Marsh Harrier**, **Brown Quail**, **Buff-banded Rail**, **Masked Lapwing**, **Pied Imperial Pigeon**, **Edwards' Fig-Parrot**, **Lesser Black Coucal**, **White-winged Triller**, **Grey Shrike-Thrush**, **Grand Mannikin** and **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin**.

About half way between Lae and Nadzab, the Highway passes through an area of swamp forest near the turnoff to the village of Ngasawapum. This is quite a good place to see **Edwards' Fig-Parrot**, and a pair has been observed recently apparently nesting in a dead tree near the side of the road. **Masked Lapwing**, **Pied Imperial Pigeon**, **Grand Mannikin** and **White-winged Triller** are generally to be found further up the Markham towards Kassam Pass. Recently, a number of species beyond their normal range have been recorded in the Markham, such as **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper**, **White-faced Heron** and **White-headed Stilt**.

### F. Erap Valley-Boana road

A few kilometres past Nadzab Airport is the Erap River. Just before the bridge is an insignificant looking road leading off to the right. This is the road to Boana, a small district headquarters. It follows the Erap Valley, which is soon flanked by steep-sided grassy hills, before leaving the river and making a very steep ascent up to a school known as Gain School. Here a road branches off towards the village of Tinibi in the Upper Erap Valley, while the main Boana road continues past the school up to a ridge at about 1000 m.

It is in the forest beside this road just past Gain School that **Emperor Bird of Paradise** is found. This is endemic to the Huon Peninsula, i.e., it is found here and nowhere else, and as such it is highly prized by visiting bird-watchers, especially those who are keen on collecting lists of exotic species to impress their friends! It is apparently not found below 500 m, and is not present in the locations around Lae mentioned in the previous sections. The bird is very similar in shape and appearance to the Raggiana Bird of Paradise, but the plumes are white instead of red. The male also has a resplendent iridescent green breast and yellow lower back. The Emperor is quite common in this patch of forest between Gain School and the ridge summit, and a dozen or so



individuals can sometimes be seen flying to and fro over the road. The voice is quite a remarkable series of pops and whip-like sounds interspersed with the loud "wau wau wau" call resembling that of the Raggiana.

The Boana road goes to altitudes beyond the range of the roads previously mentioned, and this presents the opportunity to see some species of slightly higher elevations, such as **Mountain Kingfisher**, **Stout-billed Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Red Myzomela**, **Papuan Black Myzomela**, **Mountain Peltops** and **Great Wood-Swallow**. Non-bird-watchers may also enjoy the ride, as the drive along the valley has some fine views over to the Markham. At Boana, there are numerous trails into mountain villages going up to the highest altitudes, but the walking is extremely arduous in this kind of country. Some four hours walk towards the village of Bawan will bring you to the habitat of another Huon endemic Bird of Paradise, **Wahnes' Parotia**.

### Further Afield in Morobe

Roads from Lae include the Highlands Highway to Kainantu and the Highlands Provinces, and the road to Bulolo and Wau (see Map 2). The latter gives access to some good birding sites, and at Wau, the Ecology Institute may have some up-to-date information about local conditions. At Bulolo a spectacular road branches off to Aseki and Menyamy, going right over the dividing range. A road towards the mountain headquarters of Wantoat runs north from the Highlands Highway at the Leron river about 100 km out of Lae. This goes through some of the higher altitude areas which

should be suitable for one or two of the Huon endemics, but I have so far not explored this area.

For those wishing to see Huon endemics, expensive air travel or time-consuming sea travel is involved. A road from Wasu on the north coast of the Huon is ideal for bird-watchers, going straight up the mountain towards Kabwum, giving access to the altitudinal ranges of all the endemics. First the **Emperor Bird of Paradise** is found above 500 m, then the **Wahnes' Parotia** at 1100 m, the **Spangled Honeyeater** at 1200 m, the **Huon Astrapia** at 1500 m, and finally the **Huon Melidectes** at 1600 m.

A road from Finschhafen runs north along the coast to Sialum, while an inland road linking Finschhafen with Pindiu is under construction. This too should give access to the Huon endemics. As yet there is no road link planned between Finschhafen and Lae, mainly due to the unwillingness of Finschhafen residents to allow their peaceful hideaway to be accessible by road to rascal elements.

Bechler, B.M., T.K. Pratt & D.A. Zimmerman. 1986. *Birds of New Guinea*. Princeton University Press.

Finch, B.W. 1986. Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* at Lae Airstrip, Morobe Province. Third record for mainland Papua New Guinea. *Muruk* 1: 90.

Address: Language Dept., Unitech, Private Mail Bag, Lae.

## ASIAN WATERFOWL CENSUS : PORT MORESBY AREA, 1990.

ROGER K. HICKS

The Asian Waterfowl Census (AWC) is co-ordinated by the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB) and Asian Wetlands Bureau (AWB). The aims of the AWC are "to obtain information on waterfowl populations at wetlands in Asia during the mid-winter period (January), as a basis for evaluation of sites and monitoring populations" and "to encourage greater interest in wetlands and waterfowl amongst governmental, non-governmental and private individuals and thereby promote the conservation of wetlands in Asia". In 1989 twenty countries participated, 1319 sites were covered and 6.9 million waterfowl of 222 species were recorded (Scott & Rose 1989).

PNG is not part of Asia, but was included in the Directory of Asian Wetlands (DAW) (Scott 1989). This was presumably because Irian Jaya, the western half of the island of New Guinea is a province of Indonesia which is in Asia, so the eastern half of the

island, PNG, was also included. PNG's avifauna is distinctly Australian, with less than 50% of south-eastern Asian waterfowl (as on the AWC form for that region) and if the long distance migrants (wadlers and terns) are ignored, then only 33% of waterfowl are common to PNG and south-east Asia. However, in 1990 PNGBS members were invited to participate in the AWC for the first time.

January is not the best month to conduct a census of waterfowl in PNG. It is the height of the wet season in most parts of the country. High rainfall causes extensive flooding in the lower reaches of most rivers, greatly increasing the area of wetland. Access to some sites becomes difficult if not impossible. The waterfowl also tend to disperse over a greater area, depressing numbers at accessible sites. Numbers of waterfowl are usually augmented each wet season by migrants from Australia. The late eighties were wet years in Australia, so birds have not moved to find more suitable habitat. Concentrations of waterfowl, in the Port Moresby area, are greatest towards the end of the dry season, October - November, when the wetland is smallest.

Between 11 - 14 January 1990, five members of the PNGBS (Will Glynn, Roger Hicks, Edel & Lex Kraaijo and Niklas Wahlberg) visited seven wetland sites in the Port Moresby area, six of which were included in the DAW. Each of these sites has been regularly visited by PNGBS members over the last five years, at least. Counts have been made regularly at Moitaka Settling Ponds and Hisiu Beach. The AWC counts are presented in Table 1.

Fifty-two species were recorded in the course of the census. Over the previous year only 12 other wetland species were recorded at these sites. These included two vagrants, one passage migrant and two Australian breeding species, leaving only seven species which might have been expected on the census days. No large concentrations of any species were noted, for the reasons outlined above.

The following observations were noteworthy for the Port Moresby area. At a high-tide roost near the village of Lea Lea we saw c. 50 Grey-tailed Tattlers, c. 80 Greenshanks and, most unexpectedly, six White-headed Shelduck. At Kanosia Lagoon we counted nine Wood Sandpipers and three Oriental Pratincole. There were also eight Red-rumped Swallows hawking over the lagoon. The rarest species recorded, for PNG, was probably the single adult Great Cormorant seen at Moitaka settling ponds where a Little Bittern was heard and a Black bittern seen. Individuals of all egrets recorded, at all sites, were in breeding plumage, although no nest sites were found. Australasian Grebes were noted nesting or with young at most freshwater sites and the behaviour of a pair of Little Ringed Plovers, of the resident race, suggested they were probably breeding at Kanosia Lagoon.

Scott, D.A. (ed). 1989. *A Directory of Asian Wetlands*. IUCN

Scott, D.A. & P. Rose. 1989. *Asian Waterfowl Census 1989*. IWRB.